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ABSTRACT

In 1973, the state of Minnesota passed legislation lowering the legal age of adulthood from 21 to 18; this gave 18-year olds the opportunity to legally consume alcoholic beverages. At the same time, the University of Minnesota made policy changes which enabled dormitory residents to consume alcoholic beverages in their rooms. To ascertain the effects of these changes, the University of Minnesota Technical College at Crockston surveyed dormitory residents regarding their alcohol and drug usage. For comparative purposes, surveys were conducted before and after the changes went into effect. Seventy-seven percent of the 1973 dormitory residents and fifty percent of the 1974 dormitory residents participated in the surveys. Results indicated that consumption of alcohol had not increased. Interviews with students brought forth the concept that 1974 students seemed to drink more for social purposes instead of drinking to get drunk. Student housing staff members claimed that there was less drinking and fewer problems related to the consumption of alcohol after the policy and legal changes. Student usage of marijuana and hard drugs also appeared to decrease slightly. (Author/DC)

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THE EFFECT OF THE LOWERED AGE OF MAJORITY AND RELAXED DORMITORY POLICIES ON DRUG USAGE BY DORMITORY RESIDENTS

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In 1973, the state of Minnesota, as did many other states, passed legislation lowering the legal age of adulthood from 21 to 18. Such legislation gave 18-year olds the opportunity to legally consume alcoholic beverages. At the same time, the University of Minnesota made policy changes which enabled dormitory students to consume alcoholic beverages in their private rooms. Naturally, there was a great deal of apprehension among the general public, University faculty and administration, and parents about the effect of these seemingly liberalized regulations. Would the relaxation of restrictive laws and policies result in uncontrolled consumption of alcoholic beverages by college students? Would the ultimate result be student drunks living in the resident halls? There was also the prevailing fear that non-drinking college students would be coerced into drinking alcoholic beverages. In addition, there were those who claimed that the liberalized policies would increase student consumption of marijuana and hard drugs.

To answer these and other questions, the University of Minnesota Technical College, Crookston, one of the coordinate campuses of the University system, surveyed freshmen dormitory residents in 1973 regarding alcohol and drug usage. This survey took place before dormitory policies and the age of majority law changes took effect. One year later, after the dormitory policies were relaxed and the change of law, dormitory residents were again surveyed.

Seventy-seven percent of the 1973 dormitory residents and 50% of the 1974 dormitory residents participated in the surveys.

Results

Alcoholic beverage usage in UMC's dormitories was not increased as a result of the relaxed policies and the change of law. The percentage of non-drinkers (7%) remained exactly the same in 1974 as it was prior to the law and dormitory regulation changes.

Some minor changes in dormitory residents' drinking habits were noted. For example, 8% more students consumed alcohol approximately once a week in 1974 as compared to 1973. On the other hand, 5% less students in 1974 consumed alcohol two or three times a week as compared to 1973. Other categories regarding the frequency of alcoholic beverage consumption (never, once a month, more than 3 times a week) showed very little changes (not more than 2%) from 1973 to 1974.

Students were almost evenly divided about the effect of the change of law before its passage. Fifty-two percent felt students would drink more as a result and the remaining 48% said students would not drink more.

The majority of students (54%) who lived in the dormitories in both 1973 and 1974 claimed they did not know if there was more or less drinking in the year following the policy and law change. Whereas, 27% said there was more drinking, 19% claimed there was less drinking. Therefore, when students look at the dormitory drinking situation as a whole, it is evident that they have a very mixed reaction as to whether alcoholic beverages increased or decreased.

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When asked to compare their usage of alcohol in college as compared to high school, a majority of students responded by claiming to use more alcohol in college (63% in 1973 and 60% in 1974). Thus, even though policies and the laws were liberalized, one could not say the increased drinking was due to these changes. The increase usage of alcohol seems to be a natural phenomena due to a change of environment rather than policies or law changes.

It should be noted that the student housing staff was very supportive of the changes. They claimed there was less drinking and problems resulting from the consumption of alcohol after the policy and law changes.

Marijuana and hard drug usage, as one might expect, slightly declined after the dormitory policy change and passage of the age of majority law change. However, one should take into account that this survey was taken on a two-year college campus located in rural Minnesota. With 79% of the students coming from communities of less than 10,000, marijuana and hard drug usage has traditionally been very slight. Approximately 74% of the students claimed they had never tried marijuana and 96% indicated they had never tried hard drugs. Thus, this survey should be replicated on an urban campus to measure the effect of relaxed dormitory policies and the 18-year age of majority law on drug usage other than alcohol.

In summary, allowing dormitory students to consume alcohol in their resident hall rooms and the passage of the age of majority law change did not result in increased consumption of alcoholic beverages. Interviews with dormitory students brought forth the concept that students seemed to drink more for social purposes instead of drinking to get drunk. Student resident advisers strongly supported the changes in view that there appeared to be less problems resulting from consumption of alcoholic beverages. Usage of marijuana and hard drugs also appeared to decrease slightly.

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